



## *Service Group Best Practice Handbook*

***A guide to support professional best practices at VACCRRRA member agency specialist meetings.***

**Purpose:** VACCRRRA Sponsored Service Groups are peer-led professional thought forums that encourage networking and best practice discussions among peers in a professional and supportive environment, drawing upon state guidance and outside resources. In addition, these service groups are an appropriate forum to identify and pursue skills-building trainings to meet professional needs and benefit the children and families we serve. In FY 2009, VACCRRRA member agencies continues to support specialists by allowing staff the opportunity to meet, network and discuss best practices on a bi-annual basis.

### Definitions of terms:

**VACCRRRA-** *The Vermont Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies is Vermont's network of 12 Community member agencies.*

**Service group-** *Identified service groups consist of staff within VACCRRRA member agencies who do similar work: referral specialists, resource development specialists, specialized care specialists and subsidy specialists.*

**Professional Thought Forum-** *This term is derived from NACCRRRA. the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies. The intent of professional thought forums is to create a forum that promotes critical thinking on issues of importance to child care resource and referral work.*

**Best Practice-** *Best Practice refers to identifying and recognizing what is implemented well in one or more communities and applying that process statewide to improve quality and consistency of service delivery for Vermont families.*

#### **Professional Development opportunities-**

- 1. Group identified trainings intended to increase knowledge and the ability to apply skills essential for delivering quality services statewide.*
- 2. Leadership /continuing education opportunities for emergent leaders within the field*




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**VACCRRRA Member Agencies:** Mary Johnson’s Children Center of Addison County; Bennington County Child Care Association of Bennington County; Kingdom Child Care Connection of Umbrella, serving Caledonia/Essex (South) Counties; Child Care Resource of Chittenden County; The Family Center of Northwestern Vermont, serving Franklin/Grand Isle Counties; Lamoille Family Center of Lamoille County; Child Care Project of Orange/Windsor (North) Counties; North East Kingdom Community Action, serving Orleans/Essex (North) Counties; Vermont Achievement Center of Rutland County; Springfield Area Parent Child Center of Windsor (South)/Windham (North) Counties; Family Center of Washington County; Windham Child Care Association of Windham County.

# **WELCOME TO THE WORLD OF VERMONT CHILD CARE RESOURCE AND REFERRAL!**

## **What does Vermont's child care Resource and Referral look like?**

There are 12 agencies spread throughout Vermont who provide child care resource, referral and subsidy services to Vermont parents and providers. Each of you is a member of one of these agencies.

## **How are we able to provide our services to Vermont families?**

The Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) is a federal fund, distributed to states as mandatory funding for child care. These funds can be applied toward a variety of child care related services, including services that support families in finding and paying for child care and services seeking to improve the quality of care, such as supporting the professional development of early educators in state-regulated programs.

In Vermont, the recipient of these funds is the Child Development Division (CDD), located in the Department for Children and Families in the Agency of Human Services. CDD is responsible for ensuring that the child care support monies are expended in accordance with federal and state regulations.

## **What is the role of the Child Development Division?**

The Child Development Division funds the 12 VACCRRRA member agencies to deliver regional child care resource, referral and subsidy services. The division is committed to delivering quality services statewide and has developed a strong vision for access to high quality child support services so that all Vermont children get a good start. VACCRRRA is proud to partner with CDD.

## **What is the role of VACCRRRA?**

VACCRRRA (Vermont Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies), is the professional organization of the 12 regional CCR+R agencies funded by CDD. VACCRRRA is committed to supporting the delivery of high quality services and strengthening the quality of child care in Vermont. Visit the vaccrra website, [www.vermontchildcare.org](http://www.vermontchildcare.org) or contact [info@windhamchildcare.org](mailto:info@windhamchildcare.org).

## **What is a VACCRRRA Sponsored Service Group?**

A VACCRRRA sponsored service group is a peer led professional thought forum that encourages networking and best practice discussions among peers in a professional and supportive environment, drawing upon state guidance and outside resources.

## **Why does VACCRRRA support professional thought forums among Service Groups?**

Our goals are to:

- Increase staff knowledge of best practices in child care support services;
- Increase communication and collaboration among agencies and with partners;
- Share accurate information through the utilization of available resources, inclusive of CDD and invited guests of interest;
- Encourage the development of a cohesive, unified group of professionals;
- Create opportunities for networking and sharing best practices: i.e.: Review all agencies' orientation processes and develop recommendations to best orient new specialists to the field.
- Provide leadership opportunities. i.e.: Support liaison development, encourage staff to participate in educational opportunities.
- Support and provide group identified skills related trainings. i.e.: Review special requests for statewide trainings of interest.

## **How does a VACCRRRA Sponsored Service Group work?**

- Voluntary participation: Members participate because they value and benefit from these forums.
- Collaborative approach: Participate in shared agenda planning among members of the group..
- Peer Leadership: Peer-designated liaison fulfills duties as detailed in "liaison job description," acting as the spokesperson for the group, primary contact for group members, meeting facilitator and point person / chief communicator with VACCRRRA Coordinator.
- VACCRRRA Guidelines: Group acceptance of the enclosed best practices principles, meeting guidelines, and email etiquette.

## VACCRRRA Board Adopted Meeting Guidelines

*(These are VACCRRRA's accepted meeting guidelines)*

1. Speak for oneself
2. Share air time
3. Inquire to better understand how someone may be thinking about an issue differently  
(with genuine questions and without imbedded judgments)
4. Explain the line of thinking/reasoning behind one's statements, questions and actions.
5. Be specific – use data, examples.
6. Disagree openly with any member of the group.
7. Jointly design ways to test disagreements and identify solutions.
8. Use the group forum to speak and refrain from sidebar conversations.
9. Agree on what important words mean.
10. Explicitly decide what the decision-making process is for any decisions made (e.g. consensus, recommend to someone, give input and leave the final decision to someone).
11. Bring up undiscussable issues (“elephants in the room”) when doing so will help the group process, the task at hand and/or long term relationships in the group

(Thanks to inspiration from Umbrella, guidelines adapted from Roger Schwarz's book, The Skilled Facilitator.)

## **Meeting Cancellation Policy**

In the event of inclement weather or unforeseen circumstances, meetings may need to be canceled and/or rescheduled. The service group liaison will make this decision and notify all anticipated participants via listserv and will contact the participating member agencies by phone.

Participants unsure about the status of a meeting are encouraged to contact the liaisons directly.

## Electronic Communication

Electronic communication (email and distribution lists or “listservs”) can be a helpful tool in exchanging information and ideas quickly. It also presents several potential obstacles to clear communication, due to the speed and ease of transmission and the absence of body language and vocal cues. Please consider these guidelines in addition to any policies of your employing agency to help ensure that electronic communication supports VACCRRRA’s goals of professionalism and peer support.

### Composing Email:

1. Write concise, well-structured emails and use short, descriptive subjects.
2. While emails tend to have a slightly less formal tone than other professional correspondence, avoid internet abbreviations, emoticons, and elaborate stationery.
3. Proper spelling, grammar and punctuation are important. Also reread before sending, checking for tone and content – is the message professional? Are references to third parties made in a respectful manner? Does the message provide enough information for those not present during past discussions?
4. Be judicious with attachments, and when you must attach a file use the most accessible format you have available (PDF is generally a safe choice).
5. Before forwarding a message, consider the intention of the original sender. When in doubt, ask permission before sharing.
6. Accidents happen, so only send emails of which the content could be displayed on a public notice board. If they cannot be displayed publicly in their current state, consider rephrasing the email, or using the telephone.
7. Do not forward chain letters.

### Listservs

VACCRRRA sponsored listservs exist to provide a medium for ongoing discussion between service group members outside of regularly scheduled meetings. Listservs are an ideal way to solicit input regarding best practice, brainstorm about solutions to problems, and share resources and information. Listservs require even more care and discretion than individual email, because they often include members who are not known to one another. Here are some key considerations in addition to the guidelines above:

1. In order to ensure that critical information is shared by all, listservs are open to all VACCRRRA agency staff at directors’ discretion.
2. Listserv content should be pertinent to all. If the issue only impacts a subset of the listserv members, email them directly. This also applies when replying to a listserv posting – if a reply is not relevant to the whole group, copy the thread into a new email and only send it to the intended recipient(s).
3. Dispensing with some pleasantries of spoken conversation is not only acceptable, it’s preferred. Don’t send a “thank you” or “have a nice day” message to the listserv.
4. When issues arise on listserv that require interpretations of grant specifications or raise concerns with broader systemic issues, service group members should first turn to their supervisor or director for clarification and support.

## VACCRRA Internal Problem Resolution Protocol

Individuals participating in VACCRRA communications, inclusive of phone, email and face-to-face conversations, may at times disagree with the content or manner of the discussion. VACCRRA has the following process to promote professional communications and resolve concerns that may occur in a VACCRRA sponsored environment:

*le: Staff member on listserv is concerned about a service group listserv comment or circulation of inaccurate information.*

- Address issues of concern directly with the individual(s) involved.
- Seek support and assistance from your immediate agency supervisor and or the service group liaison.
- If internal resolution does not occur, contact your supervisor and/or your agency director. The agency director may choose to consult with the VACCRRA Executive Committee at this stage.
- If the previous steps have been taken and the issue is not resolved, then the concern will be referred to the VACCRRA Executive Committee. The VACCRRA Executive Committee will follow up with the involved person(s) and the agency director.
- If the previous steps have been taken and the decision from the Executive Committee does not produce a satisfactory outcome, the individual(s) involved may inform the VACCRRA Executive Committee of their intent to file a formal grievance with the VACCRRA Board.



## **VACCRRRA Official Communications Protocol**

While individual VACCRRRA agencies and staff members maintain direct communications with Vermont's Child Development Division and the public, they are not authorized to speak for VACCRRRA as an organization.

Members and specialist groups seeking official VACCRRRA endorsement for their positions or policies must submit the proposed position/policy to the VACCRRRA Executive Committee in writing. The Executive Committee will review the request and report its decision to all VACCRRRA directors in a timely manner.

## Decision Making Process

VACCRRRA ascribes to Consensus Decision Making for Board and service group actions.

- Consensus decision-making is general or widespread agreement among all members of the group, taking into account expressed viewpoints and opinions of all members.
- Unanimity is not necessary for consensus. Unanimity requires everyone to agree on a given course of action. Consensus can be reached when a majority (more than one-half of the group) approves a given course of action, and others agree to stand aside and support the course of action. To bring this about, the course of action is often modified to remove the most objectionable features.
- If consensus cannot be reached, the group may defer decision making until further information is available.
- Group will abide by the consensus decision making process and collectively decide on issue(s).
- Liaison will inform the VACCRRRA Executive Committee and partners of outcome.

## **Professional Development “Special Request” Process**

VACCRRRA may provide up to \$25 bi-annually to each specialist group as a means to support the basic meeting costs. Funds are not available for presenters or programs.

Should one or more of the Specialist groups identify a program or presenter who would meet their needs for professional development, the Liaison(s) should forward a request for funding in writing (email is satisfactory) to the VACCRRRA Executive Committee, including a full description of the desired training and anticipated cost. Proposals of merit will be forwarded to the Child Development Division or other funding sources for potential funding.

Trainings or programs that focus on “customer service” or “family-centered approaches” and can be open to members of other Specialist groups are examples of requests that would be most attractive for potential funding.

## **Liaison Nomination Process**

To retain and recruit specialists in pursuing the role of Liaison, the following process has been established:

- Acting Liaison will announce to all service group members and their Agency Director their intention to relinquish the liaison role.
- Executive Committee will inform Agency Directors and relevant CDD staff of liaison nomination process.
- Acting liaison will circulate a written Liaison Description on the listserv, requesting nominations for liaisons from service group members and agency directors.
- Outgoing liaison will contact qualified service members directly seeking self-nominations.
- In the absence of nominations, Agency Directors with active VACCRRRA membership status will seek the appointment of interim co-liaisons.
- Recommendations will be reviewed and acted upon at the following service group meeting.

## Service Group Liaison Description

**Term:** Liaisons are elected by fellow specialists for a two year term.

### **Position Summary:**

To guide service group communications and professional development while maintaining open communication with agency director, partners and peers..

### **Requirements:**

- Ability to communicate effectively and to facilitate group meetings.
- Ability to work effectively as a team member, responding to group needs.
- Ability to work collaboratively.

### **This volunteer leadership position entails the following Responsibilities:**

- Facilitate meetings.
- Arrange two or more meetings per year, coordinating with fellow specialists.
- Ensure shared agenda development reflects group needs, ie: Networking and Best Practices discussions, hot topics, review policies and procedures, develop statewide standards of practice, plan statewide trainings and or discussing training/policy/procedure or topics of interest with guest(s).
- Maintain and encourage open, constructive and professional communications (email, listserv, phone, and in person) .
- Share actions and decisions identified during meetings with partners.
- Distribute meeting minutes within 2 weeks to fellow specialists and meeting participants.
- Seek assistance from VACCRRRA Executive Committee as needed or as group determines.
- Coordinate projects initiated by the Board, e.g.: gathering feedback among service group members regarding professional development needs.
- Communicate issues of concern, challenges, potential actions, decisions and group identified professional needs (i.e.: special requests / proposed group initiated actions) to the VACCRRRA Executive Committee.
- Adhere to professional guidelines identified in Service Group Best Practices handbook.

**Reports to:** VACCRRRA Executive Committee and agency supervisor.

## VACCRRA Sponsored Service Group Check in

The purpose of VACCRRA is to support the development of professional child care support services staff and the delivery of quality child care resource and referral and subsidy services. Our primary method of supporting member agency staff is through supporting peer-led service groups. Are service groups an effective and valuable forum for child care support services staff?

Please rank 1-4 with 1=all the time 2=most of the time, 3= sometimes, 4=infrequent

	1	2	3	4
<b>MEETING STRUCTURE</b>				
I have the opportunity to provide input into the agenda.				
The agenda and discussions reflect the interests of the group.				
The purpose of these meetings is clearly defined.				
I believe the format of our meetings (members only and invited guests) is an informative and effective model for our group.				
Service group meetings conduct professional discussions, adhering to group determined meeting guidelines.				
Meeting minutes are distributed timely.				
Meeting minutes are useful.				
<b>DECISION MAKING</b>				
The process for making decisions is clear and fair.				
There is adequate time for discussion.				
All participants are part of the decision making process.				
I am aware of “special requests” for group professional needs.				
I understand VACCRRA’s Communication policy.				
I understand VACCRRA’s role in supporting service group decisions.				
<b>PEER LEADERSHIP MODEL</b>				
I understand the role of the liaison.				
Liaison nomination and selection process is clearly defined.				
I believe peer facilitated meetings are valuable.				
Service group meetings are effectively facilitated by peer appointed liaisons.				
<b>MEETING CONTENT</b>				
Meetings are purposeful.				
Meetings are informative.				
Meetings effectively help to clear up misinformation.				
Meetings remain professional.				
I have the opportunity to express my opinions and voice concerns.				
Networking, Best Practice and Hot Topic discussions are important.				
This forum assists me in making connections with peers.				
I have implemented ideas that have positively impacted my community.				
<b>VACCRRA AFFILIATION</b>				
I understand the relationship that exists between Service Groups and VACCRRA.				
I believe VACCRRA effectively meets member agency staff needs through supporting peer facilitated service groups.				

## **Write in section:**

Why do you attend Service Group meetings?

Are service groups meeting your needs? (please explain)

Do you feel service groups have impacted your ability to deliver quality services? (please explain)

Do you feel service groups have increased your ability to develop regional / statewide connections among peers? (please explain)

How can service groups improve?

What would you like to see this service group accomplish next year?

How can VACCRRRA effectively support member agency staff?